Researcher Roles, Relations, and Representations in Ethnographic Studies of Asian American Students

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Abstract

This paper discusses the roles of researchers, relations with research participants, and representations of findings in ethnographic studies of Asian American students. It examines, in particular, the formal and latent roles of ethnographers studying Asian American students; how relations between ethnographers and research participants are shaped by contextualized interpersonal dynamics; and how fieldwork experiences and self-presentations influence representations of Asian American students in reports of findings. An example of ethnographic research involving a high-achieving Taiwanese high school student is used to illustrate difficulties related to roles, relations, and representations and how they can be addressed.

Keywords: Qualitative methods, Asian American education, high school students

摘要

本研究探討人種誌學研究者的角色如何影響與研究對象的關係以及對觀察現象的表徵。本文以亞美裔學生的學習經驗為例，分析研究者表象及潛在角色如何影響與研究對象之間的人際互動，進而探究此互動關係如何影響亞美裔學生的自我表述及觀察結果。經由一名來自台灣的高學習成就學生的個案研究，本文說明人種誌學研究工作者所面臨的困難並提出有效的因應對策。

關鍵字: 質性研究、亞美裔教育、高中學生

Introduction

For decades, the tradition among ethnographers has been to assume the role of objective fieldworkers who sustain some level of social distance while, at the same time, fostering interpersonal rapport in their relations with participants in order to elicit rich cultural data. Traditional roles and relations were challenged in the 1980s by feminists, critical ethnographers, and others who expressed concerns about how the "bracketing of researcher's world" made participants vulnerable to exploitation and other questionable practices (Fine, Weis, Weseen & Wong, 2000, p. 108). Many scholars also challenged how research participants were being represented in response to what Marcus and Fischer (1986) identified as a "crisis in representation" which challenged norms of objectivity and the authority of ethnographers to portray and interpret the lived experiences of other people. The current trend among ethnographers is to carefully critique their own approaches with the recognition that fieldwork experiences "are different for each individual, as well as for each culture [they] come into contact with as field-workers…" (Tedlock, 2000, p. 471).

This paper explores methodological issues pertaining to researcher roles, relations, and representations in ethnographic studies of Asian American students. It looks in particular at (1) the formal and latent roles of ethnographers studying Asian American students in school settings; (2) how relations between ethnographers and study participants are shaped by interpersonal dynamics; and (3) how fieldwork experiences and research and participant self presentations influence representations in publications and other public venues.

A case study from my own fieldwork involving a Taiwanese American high school student is used to illustrate these issues. The student, pseudonymously named Peter Hsieh, is a high-achieving "model minority" who also had a history of drug abuse, dysfunctional interactions with peers, and identity conflicts. I, the ethnographer, am a middle-aged, Euro-American, White woman who encountered a number of methodological challenges related to confused and conflicting researcher roles, difficult relations with Peter, and accuracy and fairness in the representation of findings in written reports. This paper concludes with methodological suggestions for ethnographers interested in studying Asian and Asian American students.

The Study

Peter Hsieh participated in an ethnographic study I conducted on adolescent coming-of-age passages in three public high schools (Hemmings, 2004, 2006). Coming of age in this research is conceived anthropologically as a two-pronged process of identity formation and community integration. Diverse students in their passages through U.S. high

schools struggle to produce and situate identities revolving around a multifaceted enduring self (Spindler & Spindler, 1992). The facets of their identities include economic, familial/sexual, religious, and political selves as well as racial, ethnic, gender, and other sociocultural ones. Adolescent students as they come of age are also involved in processes of community integration. They engage in complicated adaptations in their navigations of competing cultural crosscurrents flowing through economic, kinship, religious, and political domains of community life.

One of the research sites was a school pseudonymously named Ridgewood High located in a predominantly white, upper-middle-class, suburban community. In 1996, the vast majority of students were White, Euro-Americans. Only five percent were Asian and Asian American. Students felt enormous pressure to be "preppies" – kids who earn good grades, gain admission to good colleges, and assume good positions and lifestyles in the middle-class echelons of American life. I observed Peter and other key student participants in the study by accompanying them to classes, lunch, and free-time locations. I encouraged them to tell autobiographical identity stories about themselves, their past experiences, present circumstances, and future plans. And I conducted semi-structured, tape-recorded, interviews with them.

Peter was an exceptionally good participant because of his highly perceptive insights on what it was like to come of age in his school and U.S. society. But he was also a challenging and, at times, difficult person whose actions and interactions had significant methodological bearing.

Formal and Latent Roles

Metz (1983) makes a useful distinction between the formal and latent roles that ethnographers assume during their fieldwork. Ethnographers' formal role is that of the fieldworker whose actions are delimited by the exigencies of data collection that usually require some degree of social detachment. Many ethnographers also end up assuming latent roles that they "drag along by virtue of their bodies and biographies" (Metz, 1983, p. 392). Latent roles take many forms and emerge as ethnographers identify with, or are repelled by, participants. Formal and latent roles may become entangled in ways that lead to role negations that are confused or marked by conflict. During my fieldwork with Peter Hsieh, my formal researcher role clashed with my latent role as a White, Euro-American woman who cared about teenagers. Peter negotiated his roles in reaction to

mine. Much of the time he was a good participant who understood that his role was to provide me with rich data. He also liked the special attention he was getting from me. But there were other times when he refused to divulge information or felt I was treating him like a troubled child who needed intervention. Our role negotiations were productive but they were also troubled. So, too, were our relations.

Relations

Because ethnographers are the primary instruments of data collection, they must establish a level of interpersonal rapport that will yield optimal data from participants. Peter Hsieh had difficulties in his interpersonal relations especially those involving peers. His problems were so acute that he was placed in a "Mixed Relationship Group" established by school counselors for students who had, in Peter's words, "trouble getting along with just about everyone." Peter's interpersonal problems were framed in part by his status as an ethnic minority Asian American who was never able to fit in with, or win the social acceptance of, Euro-American classmates. This made Peter an ideal informant because like many social outcasts and isolates he was extremely observant. But the problems he was having complicated his interpersonal relations with me. Peter was quite sensitive about the fact that he was not well integrated. He constantly tested me to find out whether or how I was accepting him. He veered back and forth between being warm and friendly and cold and combative. This affected my feelings towards him and had an effect on my representations.

Representation

Good representations provide accurate and fair portrayals of people and their adaptations. They are based on rigorously accurate data records and plausible analysis and display fairness especially to participants in the research. And yet, they are also subjective in that they are inevitably influenced by ethnographers' backgrounds, fieldwork experiences, and self presentations.

My own background as a White, Euro-American woman certainly affected how I represented Peter in my writings. So, too, did my experiences in the field. The confusion, conflicts, and difficulties I encountered in role negotiations and relations were recorded in field notes as accurate accounts of what happened. But they clouded my interpretations in ways that may have tainted my representations. I did not want to paint a negative portrait of Peter and very much wanted to be fair to him especially with regards to his

self presentations. But this was easier said than done.

Peter had a positive image of himself as a straight-A, model minority student. His model minority image was an important part of his identity and how he presented himself to me and to others. But he was also a recovering drug addict who was struggling to work out a viable ethnic Asian identity in a school dominated by Euro-American classmates. His identity conflicts caused him to oscillate in his self presentations between being an acceptable preppie to someone in highly critical opposition to non-accepting preppies.

My own self-presentation as a researcher also affected my representations. I have studied high-achieving African Americans and other historically marginalized students in order to counteract decades of research that have represented them as resistant teenagers who inevitably fail in school. I usually put a positive spin on my representations of students as a researcher who portrays the ways in which ethnic and racial minority student achievers fight the odds in culturally complex high school settings and open up creative possibilities with their adaptations (Hemmings, 1996, 1998, 2004, 2006). But I also do my best to make sure that I am accurate and fair which, in the case of Peter, led to a thorny mixture of positive and negative representations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ethnographers studying Asian American students must address issues related to roles, relations, and representations through reality checks, self reflection, and member checking. I argue that these methodological issues must be addressed by ethnographers belonging to either the same or a different ethnic group as their participants.

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